

San Francisco Quilters Guild

Quiltmaker's story

Bev Stookey, Guild member since 1982

Jean: Bev, why don't you tell us a little about yourself?

Bev: First of all, I am a native-born San Franciscan. There aren't very many of us around anymore. Born and raised in the City. Attended all my schooling in San Francisco. Graduated from Presentation Academy, out at Turk and Masonic. Got Married. Raised a family. Lived in Park Merced when we only paid \$78 a month for a garden apartment! And moved down to South San Francisco where I have lived ever since, in a family home for about 54 years now. I'm the mother of three: a son, Bradley, the oldest, and two girls.

I always had an interest in quilting, but when I started out, there were no quilt stores in the area. But I was interested in merchandising, that's where I got my degree. I graduated from City College in San Francisco, and I continued to work off and on after I was married, in retail. But I always did handwork at night. I was always busy doing something. Embroidery, ceramics, knitting, gardening, you name it. But I was always drawn to quilts, so I wanted to pursue it. Well luckily for me, my husband's family was Mormon and they were from Salt Lake City, so I had my first exposure to quilting when I went back to a family ranch and met just exactly what everybody thinks a quilter should be, a little old lady with grey hair. Sitting in her kitchen, I had about 30 minutes to visit with her and just try and learn something about this art form that I was drawn to. I didn't know anything whatsoever about it. There wasn't anybody I could ask about it in California. So this lady gave me a pattern, which I later found out was a log cabin. And I came home with that block and immediately tore up all my children's leftover clothing and made this quilt top! And my husband made me a frame, which we put over our dining room table and I couldn't have company for months and months because there was nowhere for anybody to sit because of this frame. And I didn't know how to put this quilt together. I didn't know they were supposed to be thin, I thought they were supposed to be thick, so I put two, three layers of batting and then tried to hand quilt the thing, well, you know that's not going to work, and so I put that quilt away and I didn't do anything with it for a while until I stumbled upon a class at Canada College.

This was before proposition 13 came in. The class was started and run by a lady named Evie Landis, who is now in her mid-nineties and still has a group of ladies that meets with her. We went to Canada College and it was just a mishmash of ladies who had an interest in quilting. And they started a quilt class but nobody quilted, so what we did was we learned from each other. We started with a book that somebody had found someplace and we started with a sampler quilt, and every week we would do so many blocks. We picked polyester and cotton fabric because that's all that was available. We used the typical ugly brown and orange and green and we all made them big, king size, of course, and I still have that quilt, and I look at it, and really by today's standards you'd say, "oh, gosh, that's not very good." But as a learning technique, it's wonderful. You can see all your different things you did. We did an applique, we didn't know anything about applique, and out of this class, we had people come at the time who nobody knew about. One of which being Jinny Beyer, after she had won the Good Housekeeping Award. She came to our class. This very petite, southern lady, who also told us all about her quilting experience, and all. Coming from India, 'cause that's where she learned to quilt. And the Gutcheons came, we had people from London who came, that now are famous, but at that time were all just starting out.

This class and the people that were in it, Mary Whitehead was my classmate there, Katie Pasquini was in that class, so some of them have gone on to bigger and better things, making a real, substantial living out of making quilts. My life would not have had the fulfillment had I not taken that class because it was so influential in starting my career and bringing me to the point where I am today. When I think of the memories of the quilts, and the people, and the events that have happened in my life because of that class at Canada College and I credit it all to Evie Landis because without her and the recognition of the people that – and we didn't know it at the time – she didn't know any more than we did so it was kind of the blind leading the blind in this class, but she just encouraged us to go ahead and pursue it. And if we'd make a mistake, nobody ever thought we made a mistake, everybody just oohed and ahhed. So you just kept coming back on Friday afternoons to build your ego and to hear all of this.

Now there was this lady, while I was taking this class, and I was working at Penney's in retail and raising my family, and I went to her and said, "somebody has asked me to teach a class in quilting. Do you think I should do that?" The reason I asked her that was, she was the only "teacher of quilting" in the area and I didn't want her to think I was invading her territory. So many people would have said, "Well, I don't know, maybe you ought to have a little more experience." She didn't say that. She said, "Deb, go ahead, I think it would be wonderful for you." And so I started teaching. I started at the Pumpkin Patch in Half Moon Bay, and then I went to House of Fabrics (which is no longer there) and then I taught on the peninsula and then I taught at Calico Barn, which is no longer there and then I taught at the San Mateo Park and Rec Department and the Park and Rec Department in San Francisco.

The Canada College class was stopped after Prop 13 was passed. But Evie wanted the group to continue getting together and that was the beginning of the Peninsula Quilters' guild. I am a charter member of that group and have held lots of offices in that.

Mary Whitehead and I started teaching at exactly the same time. She was Menlo Park, I was the upper peninsula. Mary and I would have long talks. We were fast friends for a very long length of time and I miss her. (Transcriber's note: Mary Whitehead passed away some years ago).

I made my first quilt prior to going to Canada College. I made a hand-quilted baby quilt. It took me forever and I sold it for \$20. At that time, \$20 was a lot of money to me. But I think about that, and I wonder where that quilt is now. We didn't know how to hand quilt, we taught each other. There wasn't anybody to really show us, so all of us that have been in this for almost 50 years, were really kind of pioneers, we really kind of taught each other. And then we found our own niche, so to speak. Mine, I think really has been the teaching. I love to teach. I love to teach beginners. Because you're able to tap their talent. You're able to make them realize this hidden ability that they don't think they ever had.

What kind of quilts do I make? People ask me that all the time. Well, I do a lot of quilts that you might call simplified, because I'm teaching beginners, and it's got to be something that they understand. But they're also nice-looking quilts. It's not a slam, bam, thank you ma'am looking type of thing, it doesn't look like "loving hands at home." I put a lot of work into that. I test out every pattern before it's taught and I mean to tell you that when I was in the throes of teaching it was always my wish to have my own store. I had a good career at Penney's, worked part time but had full benefits.

But an opportunity came up for me to go in with a lady, as a partner in a quilt store in San Carlos which she had already opened although she wasn't a quilter. She found it was a lot of work and she didn't really like being in the store all the time. I was looking for a job change, so I just sort of felt my angels just guided me. I went into partnership with a person I didn't know. A lot of people wouldn't do that. I

say it's the best thing you could do, because then you learn everything. There was no competition between us. I knew the quilting. She thought she knew the business. She handled the books, I handled the customers. Beautiful.

The store is still there, it's in San Carlos, its called the Laurel Leaf. The girl who owns it now worked for us. The people who worked in the store all came out of the class at Canada College and they are still my lifelong friends. I had the store for 13 years and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. But then my partner decided she didn't want to own the store anymore. She offered to sell me her half, but I declined because I thought she would always feel it was "her store" that I had bought, and I didn't feel comfortable, I'm not sure why. But as it turned out, my life did a complete turnaround.

My mother got ill, my father died, my husband got very ill, and my daughter's diabetes went totally out of control and she was declared legally blind. This all happened within a three-year period after I sold the store. I don't know that I could have handled the business and taken on all those responsibilities, so I think that was the right decision.

I've felt that every thing that happened in my life was for a reason. Did the quilting happen for a reason? Oh yeah, you bet it did. The whole time, the ups and downs of life, the hills and valleys, I took quilting with me. Through all the hard times, I always had a little applique or something with me and people would always come up to me and ask me about it or say their grandmother used to do that. It helps take your mind of things and helps you get through a difficult time. We're all going to have some of that, but if you have a hobby, it's just perfect.

People ask me about my quilts: Do I donate them or do I sell them? No, I don't sell them at all. I don't know how many quilts I have. I've lost count and it doesn't matter, really. I don't sell them, but I do make quilts for the homeless. Now that I've done all these quilts, I have them hanging in every room of my house and over every chair. My children will take the quilts and they'll have their first choice of them. When I am going to the land on the other side or wherever you go, I intend to ask that my family put all my quilts in the church from which I will be buried, for anybody to take, because my children can't use all those quilts.

But now, as I reach an older period in my life, I'm very excited because I sew every day, every day. Whether it be 6:00 in the morning or 11:00 at night. I sew every day. But my endeavors now are for the homeless of San Francisco. But not just the homeless, it's really based on the children. I sew little girls' dresses, little boys' pants, bibs for St. Anthony, and I do quilts for the homeless. I cut 5" squares, and strips 5" by 14", and then once a month a group gets together and they sew all these strips together and they turn them over to the Pacifica Quilters and put backs to them and we do that. And now I've incorporated that into that kind of quilting endeavor for us to reach out. So many of us have been quilting for such a long time. I mean, how many quilts can you use? But does that mean we're going to stop buying fabric? Nooo, we're not going to stop buying fabric.

And about that. People ask me, do I first think about a project and then go and buy the material, or do I just buy the material? I buy a lot of material. (Laughs) I always have, and probably always will. I love it. Will I use all of it? No. I know that. Does that bother me? No, that doesn't bother me at all. If it makes you happy, you should do it. I don't see any reason not to. I belong to a lot of groups, and I would tell anybody, quilting groups. I belong to the Greenhouse Quilters in South San Francisco, there's only about ten of us and we meet every Tuesday night, and they sit and sew and talk, and it's just nice to be able to get out. I belong to the San Francisco Quilters Guild, and I get to that as often as I can, but because I live

on the Peninsula sometimes it's not feasible. But when we do go to the meeting, we go to dinner before the meeting, so that's lots of girl talk, so that's very nice. Peninsula Quilters, I don't go to anymore, not because I don't want to, it's just because I really just don't have time. I belong to the St. Anthony's Stitchers and I belong to the Pacifica Quilters. The Pacifica Quilters is a smaller group, and I like that, it's very close to my house.

But the St. Anthony group, the Stitchers, is really where my endeavor is now because I'm at a time in my life where I feel I need to give back. I wouldn't call it a hobby, I'd call it a way of life, my children call it a way of life for me. They say I'm not happy unless I'm sewing, so I think that's true. I would say that it is my vocation, my ministry now, to sew for the homeless. And people say to me, "Will you ever be done?" and I say to that, "No, unfortunately, no. Because we will always have those folks in our midst, and they are always going to need help. "

People will ask me too, do I enter my quilts, do I show my quilts. I show them to my friends, and I used to enter, but you know, for a lot of folks, it's important for them to win a blue ribbon. But the ribbons don't mean anything to me. I love the quilts that I sew. The only people the quilts have to satisfy is me, nobody else. And if I like it, I hope somebody else will like it too. But that's not why I make them. I used to enter, and I did used to get the ribbons, but what do you do with them? I mean, you know? Put them away in a box? I don't need to have public recognition. I have self-recognition and that, to me, is the most important.

Have I written any articles or published any articles or done anything like that? No. I used to write for Peninsula Quilters, I had my own little column, and I have all of those. They were fun experiences that happened in my life and someday maybe I will put those into a little book that people will have.

One of the things that I used to do but I don't do any more (mainly because its too difficult to do now, to fly now, with all the procedures): I used to be on this speakers' circuit, and I traveled all over California and used to speak and do a trunk show. I would bring 25, 30 quilts and I would get up and show people all my quilts and it was fun. I got to meet all kinds of wonderful people and the different guilds in the state and see what everybody was doing and everything. But nobody realizes what hard work that is. Nobody helps you to schlep it all. 30 quilts! I don't know how I used to do that! I don't do that anymore.

I still do auctions for different quilt guilds if they ask me, and I still will give a talk for a guild if it's close by. I just, you know, been there done that, don't need to do it again. You just move on to other things.

The advice I have for people coming into this, for future quilters, is, the greatest dismay I have right now about what's happening right now in the quilting world is we are losing the art of hand quilting. You are speaking to somebody who had a home business, who has a big quilting machine and the whole thing. Am I dismayed by it? Yeah, I am. There's nothing better than a hand quilted quilt. Why are we in such a hurry to get it done today, hang it on the wall tomorrow, start on the next one? You need to get back to the basics of saying, I'm going to hand quilt this quilt. I don't care if it takes me my lifetime. There's something rhythmic about the needle going through the cloth and you can think of all your memories and just kind of relax and communicate. I'd like to see that kind of turnaround. I'm not putting down the beautiful art that is done by the machine but when you think about it, we started by hand, let's get back to it.

J: I'm going to ask you about the workshop you just completed, and your future.

B: Oh, My Truckee Group! Okay, 16 years ago I was approached by another shop owner, Linda Brush, who used to own Fabrications, in Millbrae. And she said, "What would you think about teaching up in the Sierras, and asking anybody if they'd like to come up?" And so we started this 16 years ago and oh, my, we could really write the book on this. It was before they had the cruises, and the getaways and all of this.

We started out renting a house in Truckee. Finding a house every year where we could hold it, and we started out with six to eight people. People started hearing about it, and saying "how do we get to come to this?" Well, sixteen years later we are doing three workshops every summer for five days in Truckee and we stay at the Larkspur Truckee Inn and we have the whole conference room, so once you come in, you set up your machine and you're there to sew, and there are teachers on hand. We used to give projects for every day, but we've renamed it, and now we give what we call Stash Bashers. So you bring whatever project you're working on that you're stuck with or having problems with.

Linda and I each present a project which you can do but you don't have to do, you're going to get the instructions and the whole thing. It's a really wonderful getaway for both men and women, because we've had men come too. I really love men quilters, anyway. They have wonderful color sense. (Men have wonderful color sense and we should make better use of that resource!). The dinners are on your own, but the breakfasts and lunches are all included.

We go into Reno, we go to all the quilt stores, we're branching out now, we go to Gardnerville and Minden. There's no pressure on anybody. If you're tired of quilting, you go to your room and lie down, go to the pool and take a swim, go take a hike, whatever you want to do. We must be doing something right, because we've had a lot of the same people with us for sixteen years. I work all year on it, I test out every quilt that I am going to teach. I test them with another friend of mine, and a lot of them we go, "Oh no, this will not work." Because when you're on vacation, you need to have something that's easy but looks good. So that's a challenge. If you're going to be a good teacher, you've got to put in a lot of time for it. So yeah, thanks for asking about that.

Jean: You said you like working with beginners. What is it about beginners you like?

Bev: I like to work with beginners and I love to work with people who've never taken a quilt class before, because I think with beginners this is a whole new experience for them and they don't realize the talent that they have. I have had, I cannot tell you, students as beginners in my class, students that have gone on to great things, and its so nice because they'll say, "I started with you, Bev. If it wasn't for you, I can't wouldn't have known I could do that." I cannot tell you how much that compliment means to me. See there are things all of us can do that we think we can't, we just have to have the guidance to do it. So yes, I love to teach and I love to have the ones who haven't taken from a teacher before because sometimes I have to undo all that stuff they tell them, especially that "it's the only way you can do it." There is no real true way of doing it. You know when it comes down to it, quilting is like cooking. Give the same recipe to a bunch of people, and it's all going to come out different. You do it your way. Get some basics, and then go from there. I like to have fun when I'm teaching. It's not rocket science. There's no big mystery there. It's just that you've got to get in and try it.

Jean: Anything else you want to add?

Bev: I don't think so. You know me, I love what I do so Its easy to talk about, so I could go on and on.

Jean: That's quite a legacy you've created.

Bev: Thanks.

Transcribed by Peggy Cleary July 23, 2018